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Food Solidarity Battles: The Case of Poland After the Russian Aggression on Ukraine

Abstract

The unprovoked Russian invasion on Ukraine on 24th February 2022 awakened in Poland a tremendous amount of solidarity with the Ukrainian people, including that of food solidarity. Food aid organised by the Polish government was preceded by initiatives of private citizens and NGOs to supply Ukrainian refugees – those gathered at the border and entering Poland – with ready-to-eat food, with more spontaneous food aid continuing after they arrived. It was only somewhat later that these grassroots efforts became coordinated by local governments and state bodies.

Direct help was accompanied by two other, bottom-up initiatives, the first of which being attempts to boycott Russian food products, as well as companies and retail chains which continued doing business in Russia post-invasion, and the second being a symbolic renaming of some food products and dishes that indicated Russian origins or influences.

This work aims to analyse food aid organised for Ukrainian refugees and people remaining in Ukraine as conducted by various entities in Poland. It stresses the significance of the activism of private citizens and small groups while also presenting the social and cultural implications of the symbolic de-russification of popular foods and dishes in Poland. While discussing Polish food solidarity with Ukrainians, it is important to consider that, one year after Putin's invasion, about 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees (of which over 87% are women and children) might be staying in Poland long-term (Sieradzka, 2023; Zharova, 2023). The initial impetus for solidarity is, however, wearing off; the new context also includes so-called "solidarity lanes" established by the European Union to transit agricultural products, which have unintentionally put Polish farmers in a difficult position. As food solidarity with Ukraine might be subsiding in Poland, its popularity

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throughout most of 2022 contributed to a better understanding of relief work in the work zones and augmented the integration of Ukrainian refugees within Polish society.

Keywords: Russian Invasion on Ukraine, Refugees, Food Solidarity, Food Aid, Consumer Boycotts, Grain Imports

Methodological Aspects of Researching Food Solidarity With Ukraine

Since 24th February 2022, Ukrainian refugees have become an everyday reality in Poland and this is naturally reflected in academic publications, press articles, and the mass media (Zawadzka-Paluektau, 2022, pp. 96–98). Various aspects of their lives in Poland have been studied and analysed by both academics and public policy experts (Duszczyk, Kaczmarczyk, 2022, pp. 164–166). A body of research on migration narratives and the attitudes of Polish people towards Ukrainian refugees is also growing (Helak, 2022, pp. 3–12). The solidarity of Poles with Ukrainians has received a lot of recognition and appreciation from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, U.S. President Joe Biden, and United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres (UN, 2022). Still, there are not many analyses of food solidarity with Ukraine, other than reports and factsheets on food aid prepared by NGOs involved in such humanitarian endeavours, such as Caritas, Polish Humanitarian Action, and regional food banks. This work is meant to fill this void and to dissect food-related solidarity in a variety of ways.

As the matters discussed here deal with recent events and developments, they require a critical analysis of information presented in the media, and there are certain challenges related to researching social and cultural phenomena as they happen. Therefore, articles pertaining to food solidarity with Ukraine must be combined with documents and reports prepared by government agencies and NGOs, as well as press accounts of the ongoing developments, or even pertinent commentaries and blog entries. They are essential in tracking the course of events and serve to document the manifestations of various expressions of food solidarity with Ukraine and its people discussed in this study.

Food aid originating from the Polish government, EU programs, and non-profit organisations comprise an immense component of food solidarity, but the spontaneous efforts of citizens are still predominant. From the start of the war, they have been at the core of the humanitarian urge that many Poles have acted upon. The first days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine turned many Poles into compassionate activists

ready to collect food, hygiene products, and clothing and then take them to the border areas in their own vehicles. They used social media to engage friends and acquaintances in the collection of these articles, selecting meeting points where the donated goods could be loaded into minivans for shipment to the Ukrainian border or even beyond. The Polish and international press provided crucial information on these endeavours and constitute a starting point for the reflections in this paper.

Improvised Food Activism for Refugees and a War-Stricken Ukraine

From 24th February 2022 onward, the refugees arriving in Poland from Ukraine were welcomed with food, hot drinks, warm blankets, and winter clothing, provided mostly by regular people who wanted to make a difference, and who were not necessarily affiliated with any charity or humanitarian organisations. The Polish Economic Institute estimated that in the first three months of the war, 70% of Poles privately engaged in helping the refugees and the total value of this aid could be as high as 10 billion PLN (€ 2.2 billion), which is equal to 0.38% of Polish GDP. This is more than double what Poles spent privately on all charitable causes for the entirety of 2021 – 3.9 billion PLN (close to €866 million). Purchases of food, hygiene products, and clothing for refugees comprised the most common type of aid offered by 59% of Poles. Over half of the Polish population (53%) made monetary donations, while 35% offered organisational help or became volunteers. Finally, 7% provided Ukrainians with shelter (Baszczak et al., 2022, pp. 4–5), which basically meant welcoming them into their homes and feeding them, often for extended periods of time.

"The Great Improvisation" was the term that Warsaw mayor Rafał Trzaskowski used to describe the engagement of private citizens in charitable work benefitting Ukrainians escaping the war. While the quote is a play on words taken from a work by famous 19th century Polish-Lithuanian poet Adam Mickiewicz, Trzaskowski was referring to the readiness of Polish men, women, and even children to help in fulfilling the basic needs of incoming Ukrainian refugees. It also alludes to the fact that private citizens were faster in providing help than the national government and local authorities, which were not used to dealing with refugees in such large numbers. The help, organised privately by individuals, groups of friends, and small associations, was provided not just in border areas but also in those cities, towns, and villages where the refugees decided to stay longer. Facebook and other social media sites

and apps were brimming with appeals to help Ukrainians and online responses presented seemingly feasible solutions on how to do it. Some municipalities organised designated storage areas in well-known local spots to facilitate the handouts of food, cosmetics, linens, and first-aid products between local donors and newly-arrived Ukrainians (Urząd Miejski w Dąbrowie Tarnowskiej, 2022).

In practice, these first few weeks involved people of good will getting to the refugee reception points and asking what they needed. If they needed sandwiches, they were made. If they needed soup, word got around and large quantities were delivered. The lack of a systematic approach to refugees, however, probably caused by Poland's minimal experience with such situations, led to logistical problems. For example, someone volunteered to cook soup but the preparation and transport took 5 hours in total. In the meantime, the refugees received other meals and large quantities of soup were wasted (Ptak-Iglewska, 2022). Eventually, catering companies and cooperatives stepped in, as cooking on request became impractical and somewhat wasteful. According to researchers studying the impact of the war in Ukraine on food security in Eastern Europe, "Polish support and [the people's] welcome to Ukrainian refugees" were, at first, "based entirely on a grassroots mobilisation of individuals, businesses, educational institutions, neighbourhood centres, nongovernmental organisations, and local councils. From a refugee perspective, this means that food and essentials are available from a variety of *ad hoc* distribution points, from railway stations to special *no-money* shops" (Kovacs et al., 2022, p. 2).

The task of feeding Ukrainian refugees, along with their compatriots in war and crisis zones, was quickly picked up by non-government organisations such as Caritas Polska, Polish Humanitarian Action, Red Cross, and even the Saint Nicolas Foundation (Fundacja Świętego Mikołaja). For example, Caritas Poland has launched the Package for Ukraine programme, designed to reach Ukrainians in their homeland. In one year since the start of the war, the generosity of Poles allowed for the preparation of 83,000 packages containing nonperishable food such as rice, pasta, tea, and canned goods, as well as toiletries and first aid items. The value of each package was estimated at about 300–400 PLN (€66–90), meaning that this campaign alone delivered aid worth almost 29 million PLN (€6.4 million). In Ukraine, Caritas Poland teamed up with sister organisations Roman Catholic Caritas-SPES and Greek Catholic Caritas Ukraine. In Poland, the local diocesan chapters of Caritas partnered with numerous parishes and provided refugees in Poland with 3.9 million food packages (Caritas Poland, 2022). Similarly, Polish Humanitarian Action

(Polska Akcja Humanitarna) was able to combine direct involvement in refugee affairs in Poland with ongoing support for war victims remaining in Ukraine. Food and hygiene products, along with financial and psychological support, continue to reach "internally displaced persons and those who could not leave their homes" (Polish Humanitarian Action). This NGO was quick to establish assistance points at border crossings in Zosin, Dorohusk, and Hrebenne and ran them until the summer of 2022. Their tasks included the distribution of food, water, medicines, and toiletries. Although these assistance points are currently closed, Polish Humanitarian Action is prepared to resume their operations if necessary. On 20th May 2022, it "launched *Mission Poland* in order to effectively respond to the refugee crisis in Poland" (Polish Humanitarian Action, 2022). This could indicate an improved ability of Ukrainian refugees to prepare themselves for immigration to Poland. Since the autumn of 2022, there has been a significant drop in refugees entering Poland to escape the war. In 2023, a significant portion of the border traffic between Poland and Ukraine is generated by Ukrainians merely visiting their relatives in Poland and shopping. Both the Polish and Ukrainian governments are aware that massive waves of refugees, mostly women and children, would destabilise Ukraine's demographic situation in the long run. The emphasis is now placed on humanitarian work inside Ukraine, especially in its Western areas, where many people from the most war-stricken areas have moved without crossing the national borders. They live in newly established, moveable "container cities" with toilets, storage areas, and canteens, and both governments supply them with food and other necessities (Kacprzak, Zawadka, 2022) as they want them to thrive.

Research articles (Kovacs et al., 2022), as well as media reports (Kozak, 2022) on food aid to Ukrainian refugees, point to the challenges arising from an insufficient presence of the Polish state and its agencies, especially in the first weeks of the refugee influx. Poland first passed a law on assistance to citizens of Ukraine in connection with the armed conflict in that country on 12th March 2022, and it was referred to as the "Special Law" (Library of Congress, 2022) but the role of the state in the coordination of refugee matters, i.e., providing food and shelter, was still minimal. On 26th March 2022, Polish President Andrzej Duda signed the amendment to the Act on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine in connection with the armed conflict. It applied retroactively, from 24th February 2022. Ukrainian citizens who left their homeland due to the war were granted legal stay in Poland for 18 months, starting from 24th February 2022. This law enabled them to apply for social assistance including a one-time living allowance of PLN 300 per person. To some extent, this helped to cover their expenses for

food, clothing, footwear, and personal hygiene products, as well as some housing costs. Food aid was provided in the form of parcels or meals under the Food Aid Operational Programme 2014–2020, co-financed by the European Fund for Aid to the Most Deprived (Office for Foreigners, 2022). Still, civil society work, the informal support of networks, and volunteering were still predominant in all types of aid offered to refugees, resulting in myriad initiatives, mostly emergency-oriented and dispersed (Kozak, 2022). Generally, such efforts are intended to be temporary and supplemental to the expected leading role of state agencies. In Poland, role proportionality seemed to be inverted at the time, with the role of the state being supplemental to the spontaneous efforts of individuals and non-government entities. With a daily influx of over 100,000 refugees in the first weeks of the war, coordination between all these actors was quite challenging. The complexity and evolving character of the needs of the incoming Ukrainians overwhelmed the capacity of local services (Lee et al., 2023, p. 42). As a result, refugees in various parts of Poland had different experiences with their access to essential resources, including food (Kovacs et al., 2022, p. 3).

Boycotts and the Symbolic De-Russification of Food

Food solidarity with Ukrainians has extended to the ideological and symbolic use of food, which should not be surprising in the context of the war. After all, food is universally recognised as "one of the most important elements of the traditional material culture of every nation" (Bondar, Golikova, 2022, p. 123). Looking for ways to express their anger with Russia while standing with Ukraine, Poles have turned against Russian food products, as well as supermarkets and retail chains that continued to do business in Russia. In the food sector, the Auchan[1] retail chain became a target of protests and proposed boycotts because it continued to operate in Russia even after the invasion on Ukraine. In March and April 2022, activists protested in front of Auchan stores in numerous Polish cities almost every weekend (Brzostek, 2022). Well-known Polish visual artist Bartek Kiełbowicz supported the boycotts and used Auchan stores in his performances, replacing product labels with information on war atrocities (Przyborska, 2022). The protests were also held in front of

[1] The protests against Auchan's presence in Russia were usually part of a wider platform of boycotting the stores of France's Mulliez family, which also includes Leroy Merlin and Decathlon. Activism formed around the Facebook group Ogólnopolski Bojkot Leroy Merlin – translating to The Nationwide Boycott of Leroy Merlin – and this retail chain was the main focus and target of protests.

the Agence France-Presse headquarters in Warsaw, alleging that French correspondents were not reporting on the boycotts of French retailers in Poland and were indifferent to the ties of French businesses with Putin's murderous regime (Karpieszuk, 2022). In Silesia, protests against Auchan were held by union activists from Sierpień '80 (Czoik, 2022), which originated from the *Solidarność* (Solidarity) tradition.

At first, the boycott appeals made in public and online brought some desired effects. Auchan experienced decreased consumer activities to greater extent and longer than two other French retail chains (Leroy Merlin, Decathlon) that do not sell foods. The drop was the most significant in the second half of March 2022 until 23rd April 2022, but consumers continued their shunning of Auchan until the end of May. In June 2022, consumers returned to Auchan, the 12% inflation level at the time probably being the main motivating factor of this particular consumer choice, combined with the fact that Auchan prices were among the lowest in Poland's food sector. Data from the PanParagon application showed a rise in consumer traffic in Auchan stores in the summer months to a level higher than before the war (Madejski, 2022). One might wonder about the reliability of the quoted application data, as researchers who tried to examine the scale and effectiveness of the boycotts of the retail chains discussed above found very little objective information. The available data were rather scarce and the outcomes of analyses conducted so far had been quite inconsistent (Zralek, 2022, p. 76). The literature on consumer boycotts in the last three decades seems to indicate that they typically have a short life-span. As they start with media (or social media) reports on the misconduct of certain companies, they first generate attention and consumer participation in a boycott. Over time, participation shrinks, perhaps due to consumers' fatigue-like symptoms. Some researchers point out the difficulties in analysing promoters and inhibitors of boycott participation over time. "Does boycott participation decline because consumer aggravation fades, because consumers continue disapproving of the transgression but revert to old habits for the sake of convenience, or because they lose faith in their boycott making a difference?" (Lasarov et al., 2021, p. 1129). It is possible that Polish consumers got used to the reality of the war in the neighbouring country and, at the same time, did not see any meaningful outcomes from boycotting companies trading with Russia or even putting sanctions on the aggressor. Or perhaps inflation made passing up affordable food from Auchan even harder.

Attitudes, strategies, and practices related to food used in support of political ideals can be described as gastronativism. This concept has just been recently introduced to food studies by Fabio Parasecoli (2022,

pp. 1–30) from New York University. In Poland, certain aspects of food solidarity with Ukrainians fall within the definition of gastronativism when food is co-opted as a symbol or as a tool in a situation of political or social crisis. Parasecoli (2022, "Vodka…") sees it in restaurants re-naming traditional dishes to scrub them of any traces of perceived Russian origins. Numerous restaurants in Poland engaged in the de-russification of the traditional Eastern-European dish of dumplings (*pierogi*) stuffed with fresh cheese and potato paste – known as *pierogi ruskie* – and listed and sold them as Ukrainian *pierogi* (*pierogi ukraińskie*). Parasecoli goes on to explain that *ruskie* does not actually mean Russian in Polish (that would be *rosyjskie*). The adjective refers instead to Ruś, or Ruthenia in English, an area of today's Ukraine that in the past had been part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Habsburg empire, and interwar Poland". As expected, the Polish mainstream media and social media analysed the phenomenon semantically, and whether such symbolic changes of name are justified as a solidarity gesture (Miastowska, 2022). While factually the dumplings do not come from Russia, colloquially, the Russian people were – and still are – often referred to as "Ruskie" (Ruskies) in Poland and this term is well known to be used in a derogatory manner.

A more clear-cut example of the de-russification of food in Poland involved condiment companies who replaced "Russian" (*rosyjski/a*) adjectives in their products with more neutral terms. Well-known Polish companies such as Prymat, Roleski, and Społem renamed their "Russian mustard" (*musztarda rosyjska*) as "spicy mustard" (*musztarda ostra*) (Wieczorek, 2022). It can be argued that gastronativism and de-russification in this case served to express the narrative connected with the war and mark a so-called 'invader' as one who is not welcome at the table.

Ukrainian Women and Food Economy in Poland

Ukrainians escaping the war were invited to the table in Poland, sometimes literally and sometimes more metaphorically, with Poles purchasing Ukrainian dishes made by predominantly female refugees. Before the Easter of 2022, social media encouraged its users to buy traditional cakes and pastries from Ukrainian women as well as pierogi and their smaller alternative known as pelmeni. Over time, such initiatives became more common. The Polish food safety law of 2006, with later amendments, allows for the sale of baked goods and processed foods of "home production" as long as such production is registered. Registration with a local sanitary-epidemiological station is relatively easy and free of charge (Główny Ispektorat Sanitarny). In many cases, Polish people,

organisations, and institutions gave Ukrainian women access to their kitchen facilities and equipment.

In Wrocław, Ukrainian female expats have raised tens of thousands of PLN selling thousands of pelmeni. This little operation made the news in Poland because the women, led by Halina Czekanowska, a seamstress specialising in the production of Ukrainian folk outfits, raised enough money to buy an ambulance for Ukrainians engaged in combat against Russia. The support and interest from local people was tremendous. An example of this is that there was no fixed price for the aforementioned dumplings, but monetary donations were generous.

Ukrainian women who fled the war were given employment as cooks of Ukrainian cuisine in the Polish hotel and restaurant chain Arche, where they also received free accommodation (Bednarz, 2022). A year after opening, the restaurant, called "Garmaż od Ukrainek", still exists and public reception is positive. A similar venture was established in Krosno in the south-east of Poland, with the help of the town's mayor and local employment office. Since the autumn of 2022 the "Pampuszka" canteen has been serving traditional dishes from various parts of Ukraine as the refugees who work there come from various regions of the country (Kochan, 2022).

Food trucks with pelmeni in the Warsaw district of Stara Miłosna was another example of Ukrainian refugee women participating in the food economy of their host country with the help of Polish friends, a non-government agency focused on helping Ukraine, and the local parish (Bogoryja-Zakrzewski, 2022). It operated for a few months starting in the spring of 2022 and enjoyed popularity and great reviews. It is unclear why it did not last longer.

The participation of Ukrainian women in the Polish food economy allowed them some financial independence as well as an active and appreciated presence in their host country. Generally, their work was conducted in small, often considered alternative food chains as it is generally hard to incorporate small-scale, artisan cuisine in the mainstream food chain of large corporate processors and supermarket chains. A significant portion of Ukrainian women work in the informal economy, including the food sector, which was also the case before Putin's war. However, cooking for Poles should be treated as a temporary solution to the refugee situation, as the majority of these women might have other professional skills and aspirations, and only a small percentage of them are likely to continue working in the food/gastronomy sector, should they decide to stay in Poland. For stays in Poland that fall under the legally-granted 18 months, the home production of food, or restaurant and canteen

work might be appropriate and helpful but one should not expect that this would be a permanent role for Ukrainian women in Poland. The war refugees in Poland are now entering the phase of integration and might expect more in the hosting country than food solidarity. They might want to become work partners or even competitors in more financially attractive jobs, which could be met with resistance from Poles, who, not very long ago, were generous in providing food and shelter.

EU Solidarity Lanes and Polish Interests

Poland, as a member of the European Union since 2004, is involved, by default, in other concepts of food and agricultural solidarity with Ukraine, applied by the Council of the European Union. In the spring of 2022, the Russian blockade of the Black Sea drastically limited exports of Ukrainian produce through its traditional route, and Brussels could not stay indifferent. In May 2022, it launched so-called "solidarity lanes", enabling unrestricted food exports from Ukraine. This was followed by Regulation (EU) 2022/870 of the European Parliament and of the EU Council of 30th May 2022 on temporary trade-liberalisation measures, implemented in early June 2022 and effective until June 5th, 2023 (McGrath, Erling, 2023). Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe offered to help move Ukrainian grain to intended third country markets in Africa and the Middle East (Ścisłowska, Toshkov, 2023). In late July 2022, Polish farmers reported that large quantities of Ukrainian grains were not reaching these remote destinations but instead were entering the Polish market, driving local prices down. The Polish People's Party, previously known as the Polish Party of Peasants (Polskie Stronninctwo Ludowe) claimed that as much as one third of the transited Ukrainian grain had leaked into Poland (Harper, 2022).

In early 2023, while European Union authorities were considering extension of the trade liberalisation measures for Ukraine to the end of 2023, voices in Poland were already expressing concerns. They did not come from regular consumers, who did not see cheap grain reflected in the price of bread, which had doubled in the last two years. Regular shoppers did not mind more sunflower oil in the supermarkets, of which some was Ukrainian, possibly at competitive prices during record high inflation of 18.5% (as at February 2023). But farmers affected by the presence of cheap Ukrainian grain on the market had become increasingly dissatisfied. Their position in the domestic market had already been fragile in recent years, diminishing their livelihoods, dignity, and self-esteem (Bilewicz et al., 2021, p. 892). Not surprisingly, solidarity lanes failing to reach

markets outside Central and Eastern Europe were interpreted as a shady deal, and in the spring of 2023 farmers staged intense protests calling for the dismissal of the Polish Minister of Agriculture Henryk Kowalczyk. He resigned in early April 2023.

The indignation with the unexpected side effects of the solidarity lanes in Polish rural circles was criticised and misrepresented in the media of Western Europe. The lead of an article penned by Jo Harper and published by *Die Welt* in late July 2022 alleged that the trade concession made to Ukraine made Polish farmers "more upset with the EU than they are with Vladimir Putin" (Harper, 2022). Such opinions are patently unfair and unwarranted, as Polish residents of rural areas, with many farmers among them, stand with Ukraine, contribute to charitable help through parishes, and even welcome Ukrainians into their homes. It must be stressed that the problem with cheap Ukrainian grain is not exclusive to Poland. Farmers in Romania, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria have also experienced the grain-dumping situation and share the reactions and sentiments. Back in late January 2023, these countries, together with Poland, sent a joint letter to EU authorities, calling for an "urgent response to curb the impact of significant increase of Ukrainian grain on local markets" (McGrath, Erling, 2023).

Michał Kołodziejczak, leader of AgroUnia, a political party founded on a farmer protest movement originating in a small commune of Błaszki (Bilewicz et al., 2021, p. 893), frequently voiced farmers' demands to keep Ukrainian grain out of the EU market but still retain solidarity lanes and make them truly effective for grain transit to third party countries. In his opinion, the presence of Ukrainian grain on the markets in EU Member States since mid-2022 could be the result of corporate lobbying and not really helpful to Ukrainian family farmers. Ukrainian agriculture is dominated by 93 big agricultural holdings of international capital, who are the main benefactors of EU solutions (Adamczyk, 2023) temporarily applicable to Ukrainian products. Kołodziejczak is known to underscore the fact that Polish food security is currently of joint interest to Poland and Ukraine, having even written a letter to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in which, along with praising his heroism, he explained how detrimental cheap Ukrainian grain was to Polish farmers. While it is unknown whether Zelenskyy read this letter, his visit to Poland in early April 2023 included the promise to solve the problem quickly (Krzysztoszek, 2023).

The lack of changes on the Ukrainian side that would follow Zelenskyy's declaration prompted new Polish agricultural minister Robert Telus to enforce a ban on the import and transit (through Polish territory) of

Ukrainian foodstuff starting April 15th, 2023. Hungary quickly mirrored this move, while Slovakia banned imports without halting the transit (Polityuk et al., 2023). Although the bans on transit were lifted just a few days later, the assertion being that the shipments should be monitored and sealed to prevent tampering and offloading, the EU criticised Member States for putting individual bans in place (Florkiewicz et al., 2023). Despite initial disapproval of such unilateral action, with individual Member States deciding on trade policy (Knight, Hallam, 2023), the European Commission adopted, in early May 2023, exceptional and temporary preventive measures on imports of wheat, maize, rapeseed, and sunflower seed from Ukraine. These products could be hauled through Poland, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania, and Hungary but could not be stored on their territory nor purchased for domestic consumption. In return, these five Member States were obliged not to maintain any individual restrictive measures (Liboreiro, 2023). The deal was set to expire on June 5th, 2023 but was extended until mid-September causing the governments of Spain and Germany to express their consternation, especially that the five Member States of Central and Eastern Europe were expected to receive a support package for farmers totaling €100-million from the EU. While Madrid found restrictions problematic, alluding to possible crop failure as a result of drought, Germany's Agriculture Minister Cem Özdemir claimed that the Commission's decision "not only takes away from our European solidarity with Ukraine but also plays into the hands of Putin" (Dahm, Andres, 2023). Without undermining the validity of such opinions, it should also be remembered that it is Poland and other countries of the former Soviet bloc that had to carry the burden of the tremendous influx of cheap Ukrainian grains, most of it not tested nor certified for human and/or animal consumption, which under normal circumstances are required by the EU, as well as store it. Such surpluses do not reach Germany or other countries of Western Europe to the extent experienced in Poland and Romania, which for many months had been flooded with cheap Ukrainian grains. No EU country, critical of restrictive measures, proactively engaged or even proposed workable solutions to alleviate the surpluses experienced by five Eastern European Member States, which would have broadened the concept of food and agricultural solidarity with Ukraine and within the European Union.

Conclusions

In response to 2022's Russian invasion of Ukraine, Poles demonstrated their solidarity with Ukraine and its people in a variety of ways. Food

solidarity was instantaneous and based on instinct, as feeding people in crisis and distress seemed like a noble thing to do. Securing food aid for refugees and people in war zones through NGOs, private/community efforts, and government agencies proved to be the most lasting manifestation of food solidarity with Ukraine. It is worth emphasising that civil society and its grassroots efforts played a more significant role here than the state, which failed to assert a leadership role.

Boycotting initiatives targeting the Auchan retail chain, which continued to operate in Russia after the invasion, was another expression of food solidarity with Ukraine. While attractive on social media, consumer boycotts were not easily implemented and failed to really endure over time. They were more likely to inspire artistic concepts and performances rather than impactful, effective consumer practices. The effects of boycotting the Auchan supermarket chain were only visible in the initial months of the war. As of June 2022, customers returned to the supermarkets of the French retail giant known for affordable food prices. Ongoing inflation might have also been a factor, as well as a lack of effect regarding Auchan's dealings with Russia.

The removal of Russian references in the name of food products and popular dishes also brought mixed results. The de-russification of dishes such as pierogi or changing the names of condiments to avoid any associations with Russia could be seen as an interesting example of gastronativism, meaning the use of food as an ideological or political tool to define who belongs to the community and who does not (Parasecoli, 2022, pp. 1–30). In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the Polish attempt at food de-russification was an expression of solidarity with Ukraine and disdainful opposition to Russia.

Food solidarity extended to welcoming Ukrainian female refugees into the food economy, not just as consumers but also as creators. Home production of Ukrainian dishes flourished in Poland and allowed their makers some financial gains. Refugee women found employment in restaurants, social cooperatives, canteens and, in most cases, it was Polish organisations, companies, local governments, and/or private individuals who helped them with such ventures. Time will tell if such solutions are temporary or permanent as Ukrainian women, after establishing themselves in Poland and learning the language, might compete for better-paying jobs.

Almost two years after the invasion of Ukraine, food solidarity with Ukraine remains significant. It is well understood within Polish society that the basic needs of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and those who stayed in the motherland must be fulfilled. The collections of food, hygiene, and

first aid products are still being organised, along with financial aid through reputable organisations. At the same time, there are growing concerns about internal Polish interests, other than any potential threat from Putin. Polish farmers are continuously outraged by the influx of cheap Ukrainian grains to Poland, an unintended result of the EU solidarity lanes meant to transit grain outside of the common European markets to Africa and the Middle East. The matter became so serious that it resulted in the resignation of Poland's minister of agriculture and a declaration of intent by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to solve this matter without hindering the Polish-Ukrainian friendship.

Food solidarity is far more complicated than simply feeding the needy in crisis situations. It requires great logistical effort, an understanding of dietary needs, as well as the willingness and means to provide various types of food aid for an extended period of time in changing circumstances. Food solidarity, as any solidarity, can become problematic over time as those who offer it see their own interests being hurt. This is particularly the case with Polish farmers affected by the significant – albeit unofficially planned – presence of Ukrainian grain on the EU market. Solving this problem has become a matter of international importance which also involves other countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Among the various modes of expressing solidarity with Ukrainian war refugees and their compatriots who stayed in the motherland, food plays an important role, both literally and symbolically. Food solidarity is surely the most effective, if the desire to help is targeting the real, not just the perceived, needs of the people. It might be seen as a prelude to other types of solidarity involving much sought-after goods and services improving the overall quality of life. However, this broader solidarity might be much harder to achieve.

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